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Doctor Tells Of Kennedy's Gland Trouble

By DAVID M. CLEARY
Of The Bulletin Staff

New York — For at least nine years, the late President John F. Kennedy lived an active life despite malfunctioning adrenal glands.

Those glands were producing little or no cortisone, and Kennedy had to take the hormone, which is essential to life, on a regular schedule to keep going.

With careful medical management of his dosage, plus an indomitable spirit, Kennedy showed that a deficiency of the adrenal glands can be controlled as easily as a malfunction of the thyroid, a medical expert said here yesterday.

Dr. John K. Lattimer, professor and chairman of the department of urology at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, is one of two medical authorities so far allowed to examine the autopsy records of the late President after the family held them secret for eight years. He described his findings to members of the American Urological Association, holding its 68th annual meeting.

Reported in 1955

Kennedy's malfunctioning adrenal glands were first reported in 1955 by Dr. John Nichols, a pathologist, but the identity of the patient was not then made known. The medical report simply described a patient in whom recovery from a back operation was complicated by insufficient output of cortisone from the adrenal glands, and how that patient recovered when the hormone was administered.

After the President's assassination, Dr. Nichols identified the patient as the late President.

Autopsy showed that Kennedy's adrenal glands were shriveled, consistent with Dr. Nichoels' description of inadequate function for many years, Dr. Lattimer said.

After his back operation to alleviate a World War II injury, Kennedy ran into trouble. His blood pressure fell, he lost weight, and there were color changes in the skin. All symptoms disappeared when the vital hormone was given artificially, and Kennedy took "a cortisone-like compound" for the remainder of his life.

Dr. Lattimer refused to identify the exact drug used. There are many cortisone derivatives and analogs on the market, some of them simply replacing the missing hormone and other stimulating cortisone production in the malfunctioning glands.

Issue in 1960

During the 1960 Presidential nomination campaign, Kennedy's health became an issue. Mrs. India Edwards, a former vice chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said Kennedy had Addison's disease, and "if it weren't for cortisone, he probably wouldn't be alive."

Mrs. Edwards was then backing Lyndon Johnson for the nomination.

Kennedy denied having Addison's disease.

That issue hinges on a technicality, Dr. Lattimer said yesterday. Kennedy had the adrenal insufficiency that causes the symptoms of that disease, but not the tuberculosis that was given as the cause of adrenal gland damage by English physician Thomas Addison when he first described the disease in the 1800s.

"The important thing to urologists today," said Dr. Lattimer, "is that Kennedy demonstrated that adrenal insufficiency can be treated effectively with hormone replacement."